



### Lens on Learning Theory – Learning Task (Assignment) Design

Researchers at the University of Hawaii interviewed nearly 200 students. When asked what they wanted to know from faculty with respect to assignments, they responded as follows.

#### Students want to know:



- ? How will the assignment help them learn the course material?
- ? If the professor had to complete the assignment, how would he/she go about doing it?
- ? How does the assignment relate to work in the field?
- ? What exactly will the professor look for when he/she evaluates the assignment?
- ? How will the professor help them through the assignment?

Both students and faculty invest a lot of time and energy in assignments. Effective design can help to ensure a maximum return (learning) on that investment (time and effort). Consider the following assignment design process.

#### Step 1 - Purpose:

- Link assignment to clear, student-centred objectives

#### Step 2 – Task Definition:

- Develop learning tasks that are authentic, engaging, and relevant
- Design tasks in a way that deters plagiarism

#### Step 3 - Process:

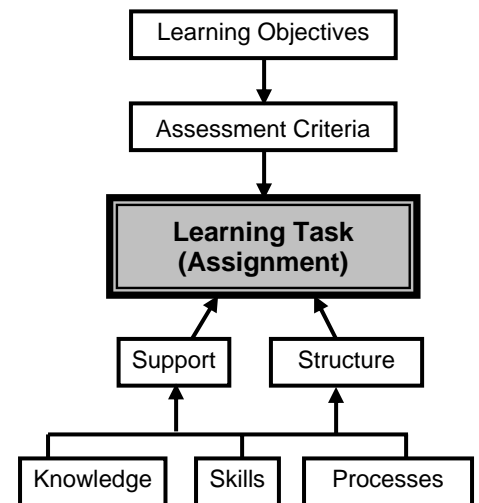
- Outline the steps for completing the task (i.e. procedural, cognitive (thinking), psychomotor (doing) steps).
- Articulate the strategies you use to successfully complete the task

#### Step 4 – Support and Structure:

- Identify areas that require support and incorporate those supports (i.e. modeling, visual organizers, guides, feedback, resources, and instruction).
- Structure the assignment for success

#### Step 5 - Assessment:

- Design an assessment tool that communicates assessment criteria clearly and explicitly
- Prepare a clear, complete handout that includes assessment criteria
- Consider options for feedback (i.e. self assessment, peer/ teacher/ client feedback)



### Reflection on Practice

1. How can your assignments reflect more authentic learning tasks?
2. In what aspects of your assignment (knowledge, skills, processes) do students need support?
3. How can you make the assessment criteria more explicit for your learners?
4. What are one or two ideas in this document that you might apply to future assignments?

### Expanding Your Teaching Toolkit – Assignment Design Checklist

#### Step 1: Purpose (Why?) – Questions to Ask Yourself

- ? What will the end result tell you about student learning?
- ? Why is this assignment worth doing? So What?
- ? How will the assignment help students synthesize course materials, promote critical thinking, practice skills, and/or deepen their understanding of topics with the course?

## **Step 2: Task Definition (What? When?) – Questions to Ask Yourself**

- ? How does the assignment reflect realistic workplace processes, challenges, and/or situations?
- ? Have you tried the task to ensure it is achievable given the time and resources available?
- ? Would you, as the instructor, find the task engaging? Why? Why not?
- ? How can you offer choice and flexibility within the assignment parameters?
- ? Can students complete the assignment given their current levels of skill and knowledge? If not, how can you build in the needed skill development activities?
- ? How could you make the audience for student work more authentic (i.e. peers, employers, clients, media, community organizations, practitioners, public)

### ***Ideas for Authentic, Engaging Tasks***

1. Prepare a submission for a journal, magazine, or newspaper (i.e. letter to the editor; policy recommendations; article to support an argument; article to compare and contrast two products, ideas, presentations of information, people, movements, etc.)
2. Script a dialogue between two people with different points of view on an issue, problem, significant event, etc. (i.e. historical or political figures, presidents, lawyers, managers)
3. Present a proposal or set of recommendations for a particular problem, situation, etc.
4. Evaluate existing work (i.e. promotional materials, web sites, articles, manuals, proposals)
5. Adapt information for a specified audience or format (i.e. children, client, radio, television)

## **Step 3: Process (How?) – Questions to Ask Yourself**

- ? What prior knowledge and skills do students need to successfully complete the assignment?
- ? What steps and strategies lead to successful assignment completion?

## **Step 4: Support and Structure (How?) – Questions to Ask Yourself**

- ? What resources might help students with the various steps and strategies?
- ? How might students get feedback on their ideas? on the organizational structure? on a draft?
- ? What are the due dates and how do they fit with other expectations of students?

### ***Ideas for Providing Support and Structure***

1. Prepare a handout that clearly explains due dates and times, step by step instructions for completing the assignment, tips and strategies for success, and evaluation criteria.
2. Break large assignments down into smaller assignments that build towards the final submission. Set up smaller assignments with grading criteria, and submission deadlines.
3. Show examples of excellence from previous assignment submissions (make sure you get student permission and blank out all name references).
4. Teach students strategies that will help them successfully complete aspects of the assignment. (Visit the learning strategies database for ideas <http://www.muskingum.edu/~cal/database/general/> )
5. Have students respond to the assignment in writing (i.e. challenges they anticipate, things that are unclear, questions they have). Support students (or refer them to supports) in these areas.

## **Step 5: Assessment (How Well?) – Questions to Ask Yourself**

- ? How will you clearly communicate assessment criteria to students (for excellence, for passing)?
- ? Have you considered a variety of assessment tools, including rubrics?
- ? How can the performance criteria be used (i.e. self, peers) for giving feedback?

## **References and More Information**

Dalhousie University. (2004). Assignment design strategies. Retrieved November 4, 2004 from <http://plagiarism.dal.ca/faculty/assignment.html>

Marchessault, B. (2003). Developing learning assignments that use the Internet. Centre for Teaching and Learning: Georgian College. Retrieved November 2, 2004 from [http://staff.georgianc.on.ca/ctl/docs/Developing\\_learning\\_assignment.pdf](http://staff.georgianc.on.ca/ctl/docs/Developing_learning_assignment.pdf)

University of Maryland Libraries. (2004). Creating effective research assignments. Retrieved November 2, 2004 from <http://www.lib.umd.edu/UES/assignment.html>